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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU; STATE FOR NEA/P, NEA/PPD

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KPAO

SUBJECT: IMPACT OF KHADDAM: A SYRIAN OPPOSITION FIGURE
SPEAKS OUT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a conversation held before the release of political prisoner Riyad Seif and others, prominent Syrian XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX opposition figure XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told Polchief January 16 that former VP Abdul Halim Khaddam's press campaign had thrown the Syrian regime into crisis but would not by itself threaten its survival. Khaddam's sharpest criticism had been aimed directly at President Bashar al-Assad, as a way to encourage regime pillars to calculate that it was in their interest to distance themselves from or possibly move against Asad, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said. Khaddam's attacks had strengthened the opposition in Syria and given it more prominence, but we assess that the release of five of the six Damascus spring detainees effectively short-circuits Khaddam's plans for encouraging the Syrian opposition to rally around him. End Summary.

¶2. (C) KHADDAM INFILCTED DAMAGE, BUT ...: Syrian opposition figure XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told Polchief January 16 -- before the release of former MP Riyad Seif and other detainees -- that former VP Abdul Halim Khaddam was in a position to deepen severely the long-term crisis in which the regime finds itself but not, by himself, to bring the regime down. His primary limitation is that he has never had strong support in the Syrian military and security services, which are dominated by the Alawites, noted XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

¶3. (C) ENCOURAGING REGIME FIGURES TO ABANDON ASAD? XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said that Khaddam's criticism of Asad as a weak, indecisive, dangerously inexperienced and impulsive leader highlighted a problem that regime power brokers like SMI head Asif Shawkat and brother Maher al-Assad were already aware of: How does an essentially totalitarian regime function with such a vacuum at the center? The issue is more stark now: Do regime pillars (mostly Alawite) stand with Asad and risk possibly losing power completely, or move against him? XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that Asad now found himself ensnared in a dangerous, intractable crisis with UNIIC over the assassination of Hariri, with the finger of suspicion directed by Khaddam pointing squarely at him.

¶4. (C) OPENING DOORS FOR THE OPPOSITION: With regard to the opposition in Syria, Khaddam's attacks had strengthened it significantly. Khaddam had spoken about it in a very positive manner and adopted the opposition's program, primarily embodied in the Damascus Declaration. This had enhanced the opposition's standing in Syria, making it likely that the regime would try to reach out to it in the coming weeks. (Comment: The release of Seif and the fresh rumors about a new political parties law indicate this effort may

already be underway.)

¶15. (C) In addition, Khaddam had opened a door for the opposition to the U.S., insisted XXXXXXXXXXXX. His criticism provided some cover for opposition figures who wanted to criticize the regime but feared being branded as an agent of the U.S. or as anti-Syrian. "We must take advantage of the opening Khaddam has provided," maintained XXXXXXXXXXXX. On a separate note, XXXXXXXXXXXX, took note of Khaddam's opening to the Syrian Muslim Brothers (MB) and urged the U.S. to engage with the MB leadership, dismissing the notion that they posed a threat to future secular democratic development in Syria. (Comment: Our contacts are divided on whether the MB poses a potential threat. Post will provide a fuller assessment septel.)

¶16. (C) Comment: Post shares XXXXXXXXXXXX assessment that Khaddam's press interviews have created some space for the opposition, although how much its position has been strengthened remains to be seen. The January 18 release of Riyad Seif and four other Damascus Spring detainees seems to represent a regime attempt to respond to Khaddam and close off his effort to rally the opposition to his side. Seif is now likely to attract all that opposition support (and to draw much broader support in Syrian society). The SARG release of Seif is likely to render Khaddam a less imposing figure, with less potential for being viewed as an alternative to the regime. Seif's prison term would have ended in September of this year in any case, forcing the SARG to deal with his case soon enough. The fact that it moved now, however, as it navigates through a crisis Khaddam helped to precipitate, gives some indication of how much Khaddam rattled the regime's leadership. Seif, previously viewed by the regime as a potential Mandela-type figure on the Syrian political scene, appeared post-Khaddam as a useful distraction and perhaps for the regime as less threatening than Khaddam. In the long run, as he moves out of the shadow momentarily cast by Khaddam, Seif will probably prove to be the far more imposing opposition figure (but without access to the weapon of "regime secrets" wielded by the former VP). The SARG for its part will work strenuously in the coming months to split the opposition, manipulate any political opening resulting from a new parties law, and in short, circumscribe to the maximum Seif's political potential.
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